

## Some Reflections on George Washington and Slavery

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What a thrill it is for me to be here – in this historic room.

I'm sure I don't need to explain to the audience here the profound significance of the events that took place in this room, on December 23, 1783. That was the day Washington, with great ceremony, resigned his commission as Commander in Chief of the Continental Army.

His resignation was, for Washington's contemporaries, and for later generations, by far the greatest act of his life.

Could the victorious general have crowned himself king or emperor instead? Many at the time thought so. But he did not take that route – a familiar one in history, as the examples of Alexander the Great or Julius Caesar showed. But Washington gave up power instead, charting a new, republican course.

"Truly affecting and important was the scene, when he resigned his commission!" exclaimed a New Jersey clergyman, recounting Washington's life. "So august was the spectacle! So moving were the acts! To see the beloved and unconquerable Hero surrender the insignia of his trust in subordination to the civil power... was an instance of moderation and greatness, noble as rare."

It would be difficult to exaggerate the impact of his resignation on Americans and Europeans alike.

You may have heard the story King George III, told that George Washington planned to return to Mount Vernon if successful in the war. "If he does that," King George allegedly said, "he will be the greatest man in the world."

"For my own part," mused another American, "I never contemplate [the act], but each fibre vibrates with rapture, and the vital current trembles through every artery of my frame!"

The resignation that took place here in this room was what made George Washington so great, for his contemporaries. This willingness to give up power.

"Our virtuous Chief," declared Henry Lee in some of the most famous words ever spoken about Washington, "surrendering his power into the hands from which he had received it, converted his sword into a ploughshare."

Thus, Lee concluded, did Washington teach "an admiring world, that to be truly great you must be good."

It has a nice Biblical resonance, from Matthew, 20:26: "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant."

I suspect everyone in this room knows this history. You've heard it many times before, in speeches like this one.

You all know why Washington was not just great, but also good. Why, in fact, it was his goodness that made him great.

Tonight, however, I've been invited here not to talk about Washington's greatness, but about his goodness. More specifically, I've been invited to talk about Washington's relationship to slavery.

It's a complicated subject, as we'll see.

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Let's start with some of the basics.

Washington was born into a world in which slavery was just a fact of life. Most people saw it the way many see poverty today. It wasn't a moral wrong so much as it was a regrettable part of the social order.

George Washington's relationship with slavery began very early. He inherited ten slaves when his father died in 1743 – at the age of 11. When his brother died in 1752, George inherited another six slaves, along with the estate at Mt. Vernon.

Washington's early years were intertwined with slavery, as they were for anyone growing up in the lower ranks of the Virginia gentry.

Washington shot into the uppermost ranks of Virginia society when he did what smart ambitious young men do.

Married rich.

His wedding in 1759 to the widow Martha Custis gave him control of an immense fortune – and of some 84 slaves.

Washington would not own the Custis slaves, but he would benefit from the wealth they created.

With this new wealth, he increased his purchasing, buying at least 55 more slaves over the course of the next twelve years.

The casualness with which Washington could discuss the buying and selling of human beings comes as a shock to modern ears. Let me read from a letter Washington wrote to a ship captain sailing for the Caribbean in 1766.

With this Letter comes a Negro (Tom) which I beg the favour of you to sell, in any of the Islands you may go to, for whatever he will fetch, & bring me in return for him

- One Hhd of best Molasses

- One Ditto of best Rum
- One Barrl of Lymes—if good & Cheap
- One Pot of Tamarinds—contg about 10 lbs.
- Two small Do of mixed Sweetmeats—abt 5 lb. each
- And the residue, much or little, in good old Spirits

That this Fellow is both a Rogue & Runaway (tho. he was by no means remarkable for the former, and never practised the latter till of late) I shall not pretend to deny—But ... he is exceeding healthy, strong, and good at the Hoe ... which gives me reason to hope he may, with your good management, sell well, if kept clean & trim'd up a little when offerd to Sale.

I shall very chearfully allow you the customary Commissions on this affair...

I wish you a pleasant and prosperous Passage, and a safe & speedy return

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By the time of the Revolution, approximately 150 slaves worked the thousands of acres of fields at Mt. Vernon.

Ideas about the morality of slaveholding were changing, however. As the American Revolutionaries called for liberty, their slaveholding came under growing scrutiny.

During the Revolution, Washington determined not to buy or sell any more slaves. His motivation might have been economic. He'd switched early out of tobacco production and into wheat, which requires far less labor.

From that point on, Washington would be an ambivalent slaveholder.

Once he'd ascended to the heights of fame across the United States and Europe, many people urged Washington to act against slavery, calling on him to live up to the Revolution's professed ideals.

"Now is the time to demonstrate... that America was earnest, and meant what she said," wrote the New Jersey Quaker David Cooper in a popular pamphlet, citing the Declaration of Independence's principles: "that *all mankind* came from the hand of their Creator *equally free*." Washington knew Cooper's pamphlet well: he owned a copy, which he bound in an elegant calfskin volume, stamped with his bookplate, and signed in his hand.

Washington felt the weight of international antislavery opinion. He kept abreast of the abolitionist movement in Britain, where prominent statesmen advocated for the end of slavery, and also in France, where his friends like the Marquis de Lafayette joined antislavery societies.

Washington knew about the growing disgust with slavery among his liberal, Enlightened friends. In private correspondence, Washington occasionally expressed a desire to free his slaves.

And yet he never acted. He seems to have been paralyzed.

Amazingly, Washington waited until the very end of his life to take action against slavery.

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After his death, when Washington's will was opened, one provision stood out: Washington had freed his slaves.

In an act that echoed his resignation as Commander in Chief of the Army in 1783, Washington's will made a grand symbolic gesture.

By decreeing freedom for his slaves, he erased the last stain on his legacy. "How amiable, how consistent is the character of this illustrious man!" exclaimed a Massachusetts lawyer who'd served in the Continental Army. "Himself the champion of political freedom, he disdained to hold his fellow-creatures in abject domestic servitude."

Washington fulfilled the Revolution's promise. "Thus *uniform* in all his conduct, was this FRIEND of the *Rights of Mankind*," added another eulogist. "Thus consistent, were his *Republican Principles*."

No one celebrated Washington's act of abolition more than the Rev. Richard Allen, a co-founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. "We, my friends, have peculiar cause to bemoan our loss," declared Allen to an audience of African-Americans. "He dared to do his duty, and wipe off the only stain with which man could ever reproach him."

Like so many others, Allen argued that Washington's greatness stemmed his goodness.

But Allen went a step further. He drew a direct connection between the Washington who delivered his white countrymen from British tyranny to the Washington who delivered his slaves to freedom. For Allen, the goodness that made Washington great was the decision to free his slaves.

"If he who broke the yoke of British burdens 'from off the neck of the people of this land', and was hailed his country's deliverer, by what name shall we call him who... emancipated his 'bondwomen and bondmen'—became to them a father, and gave them an inheritance!"

So far so good – and so great.

In this account, Washington resolved his complicated, lifelong relationship to slavery in a final, glorious act.

I call this the liberal or enlightened narrative of Washington and slavery. We start in moral darkness. We come to recognize the moral problem. And then we transcend the moral dilemma.

What a satisfying account. What a comforting story to tell.

We have struggled with slavery and racism, but through trial and tribulation we have overcome them.

You see: the moral arc of the universe does bend toward justice.

And I suppose it's true, so far as it goes. But it's not the whole truth. Washington's life with slavery is more complicated. And more interesting.

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For all the talk that Washington had "let the oppressed go free," the effects were less clear. Legally, Washington could free fewer than half slaves in his control: just 124 of the 317 working his lands.

Forty slaves were leased from a neighbor and another 153 belonged to the estate of Martha Washington's first husband. Washington had no power to free them.

What was more, with the single exception of his wartime valet, William Lee, now disabled, the will did not actually free anyone.

Washington had carefully drafted the provisions. He specified that no one (other than Lee) be emancipated until Martha died.

Washington said he wanted to avoid breaking up the families that connected his and the Custis slaves, causing Martha "disagreeable consequences" — appeals by desperate men and women, perhaps, or the flight of whole families.

For all his ambivalence about the morality of slavery, Washington had never tolerated runaways. He'd worked aggressively to prevent them. Those who did escape — like Martha's seamstress, Ona Judge — he hunted down with the full force of his influence.

As for the slaves who were too young to support themselves, they were to be taught to read and write, trained into a useful profession and freed at the age of 25.

All told, the will was less of an abolition than it was a plan for gradual manumission.

Indeed, Washington's will drew from the same well of thought that nourished plans for gradual manumission. Most white people who advocated for the abolition after the Revolution promoted a freedom phased in across a series of stages.

Pennsylvania, for example, which passed a gradual abolition law in 1780, did not free any slaves outright. It decreed instead that any people born into slavery after that date would be free at the age of 28.

Just beneath gradual abolition ideology lay an idea that slaves were unfit for immediate freedom, whether from racist assumptions about black inferiority, or from an idea that enslaved people had been so damaged by slavery they would not be able to support themselves in freedom. They needed to be lifted up before they could be liberated.

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So it turns out that Washington did not quite “emancipat[e] his ‘bondwomen and bondmen’,” as the Rev. Allen had stated. But the complexity hardly ended with the will.

As it turns out, Washington’s will was not carried out as he instructed. His slaves were not freed upon Martha’s death.

For all the delay and reflection in putting together his final act – and in a sharp break from his cautious and methodical nature – Washington seems not to have thought the whole matter through very carefully.

What doesn’t seem to have occurred to him is that with his will, over a hundred people were waiting for Martha to die so they could become free.

“In the state in which they were left by the General,” wrote Abigail Adams, after a visit to Mount Vernon, Martha “did not feel as tho her Life was safe in their Hands ... She... was advised to set them all free.”

What a mess Washington created for Martha with his ambiguous emancipation.

And so Martha did as she was advised, freeing her husband’s slaves a year after his death, some two years before her own.

She did it not out of generosity but fear: “for *prudential* reasons,” as Martha’s grandson put it.

It was thus not George who freed his slaves but Martha; and she did so not in fulfillment of his instructions but in contravention of them.

A complicated legacy indeed.

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Washington’s legacy of slavery is also our legacy of slavery. We keep thinking we’ve gotten past it – only to find, as Martha did, that it keeps returning to haunt us.

As a historian, I’m trained to believe that it’s both too easy and morally lazy to judge people in the past by the standards of the present. That kind of judgment is not what historians do.

And yet: to question the morality slavery is hardly a new idea.

Washington knew he’d be judged harshly for his slaveholding. Many people told him so explicitly.

Consider a July 4 Oration delivered in Baltimore in 1791.

Slavery, the most implacable enemy to your country... makes a rapid progress, and threatens you with destruction. Already has it disturbed the limpid streams of liberty, it has polluted the minds of your youth, sown the seeds of despotism, and without a speedy check to her ravages, will sink you into a pit of infamy, where you shall be robbed of all the honours you have before acquired.

Washington was familiar with those criticisms. That Baltimore oration had been printed as a pamphlet. Washington owned a copy, and had it, too, bound in his collection of antislavery writings.

He knew that future generations would judge him severely for his continued ownership of slaves. Indeed, that knowledge was probably the main reason he tried to free them in his will.

The point is: we shouldn't judge Washington by the values of our time. But we should judge him by the values of his own.

Many of Washington's contemporaries acted against slavery. Benjamin Franklin, the only other American of comparable stature, had acted late in his life, becoming president of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society in 1787 and later signing an antislavery petition to Congress.

Washington's close friend, counselor, and future rap star, Alexander Hamilton, similarly joined the New York Manumission Society and spoke out against slavery. Even Thomas Jefferson publicly criticized the institution on various occasions.

And then there was Washington's dear friend, Lafayette, who pressed him to act.

"Permit me to propose a plan to you," Lafayette wrote Washington in 1783. "Let us unite in purchasing a small estate where we may try the experiment to free the Negroes, and use them only as tenants — such an example as yours might render it a general practice."

Although it was a gradual manumission plan similar to his own thinking, Washington refused. He called the proposal "striking evidence of the benevolence of your Heart. I shall be happy to join you in so laudable a work; but will defer going into a detail of the business, 'till I have the pleasure of seeing you."

Defer was to be the theme of his life with slavery.

When Lafayette visited Mt. Vernon in 1784, the two discussed Lafayette's plan. One visitor who heard their discussions later wrote: "You wish to get rid of all your Negroes, & the Marquis wisht that an end might be put to the slavery of all of them. I should rejoice beyond measure could your joint counsels & influence produce it."

And yet Washington deferred again.

Lafayette didn't wait. He bought a South American plantation in 1785 and began the gradual emancipation of some 70 slaves. "Would to God a like spirit would diffuse itself generally into the minds of the people of this country," Washington wrote a few years later, after he learned the details, "but I despair of seeing it."

Washington, the quintessential man of action, refused to act on this matter. He didn't try diffusing that spirit himself. Instead, he put his faith in "Legislative authority" to act on slaves' behalf. "To set them afloat at once would, I really believe, be productive of much inconvenience & mischief; but by degrees it certainly might, & assuredly ought to be effected & that too by Legislative authority."

With the benefit of hindsight, what I find so powerful about the argument taking place during Washington's life is how one side turned out to be so prescient.

Those who argued that slavery threatened the nation with destruction were right. It nearly did destroy the nation, and led to the death of hundreds of thousands of Americans—not counting the millions of slaves who lived another 65 years under the institution.

Meanwhile those who urged that action against slavery be postponed turned out to be wrong. Ending slavery became harder, not easier, with the workings of time.

I'm also struck by the incoherence of Washington's thinking.

Did Washington resist making a grand and controversial abolitionist gesture during his life? Perhaps: but then why did do precisely that in his will?

Did Washington think that freeing his slaves was too complicated given the mixed families between his and the dower slaves, making freedom impossible? Perhaps: But then why proclaim freedom for them in his will?

Ultimately, none of the answers that Washington gave for not freeing his slaves while he lived can stand up against the fact that he did it, or tried to, when he died.

Washington emerges in this sense, perhaps, as the best symbol for the United States today.

The Father of the nation: who could not confront the hardest of realities, who ambivalently bequeathed slavery onto his descendants – and who left us a legacy we still wrestle with today.